

Unable to afford routine health care, the uninsured tended to seek treatment only when their conditions became acute. Emergency rooms, required by state law to admit anyone with a medical emergency, became the primary health care providers for millions of Californians. The chairperson of the California Assembly Health Committee remarked that emergency rooms were becoming repositories of the proof that the state's health care system was not working.

Escalating medical costs and reduced levels of government support, however, led many financially strapped California hospitals to close their emergency rooms. Reductions in service in Los Angeles more than doubled the response time required for a critically injured person to be taken by ambulance to an emergency room. The crisis in health care was thus a matter of life and death. "People who feel very comfortable and protected right now because they have insurance," warned one UCLA professor of public health, "could end up in the morgue because that hospital emergency room that they simply assumed would be there for them has its doors locked."

Californians fortunate enough to have health insurance faced another daunting problem: the rising cost of coverage. Annual insurance premiums in the early 2000s rose at a double-digit pace, outstripping by three or four times the overall rate of inflation. The increase in cost put an enormous strain on businesses providing health insurance for their workers. As a consequence, employers routinely shifted a greater share of the premiums to their employees, offered skimpier benefits, or dropped coverage altogether. "The cost of health care has continued to increase so rapidly," observed the director of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research in 2005, "it has outstripped by far workers' increases in salary and the ability of employers to afford it." Many employees who lost their coverage soon discovered that the cost of self-insurance was prohibitive—averaging about \$10,000 a year for a family of four.

About half of all Californians with health insurance received their medical services through managed-care *health maintenance organizations* (HMOs), systems of doctors and hospitals that provide health services to enrolled members for a predetermined annual fee. Membership in HMOs grew rapidly, but complaints also increased. Doctors found themselves caught between caring for their patients and staying within reimbursement limits set by the HMOs. Critics charged that these limits encouraged doctors to delay care and refuse referrals to specialists. In 1996 the legislature established a Managed Health Care Improvement Task Force, headed by an attorney whose sister had died after an HMO had denied a bone marrow transplant to combat her metastasized breast cancer.

Not surprisingly, health care became a hotly contested political issue in recent years. In the last days of his administration, Democratic Governor Gray Davis signed legislation requiring larger businesses to provide health insurance for their employees. Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Republican challenger in the recall election of 2003, denounced the new law as a "job killer" and supported a referendum that overturned it. Once in office, Schwarzenegger stirred further controversy by attempting (unsuccessfully) to block a law signed by his predecessor requiring hospitals to maintain a minimum ratio of nurses to patients. Citing the exorbitant costs, he also vetoed legislation that would have extended health insurance coverage to hundreds of thousands of California children. Schwarzenegger's veto was

vigorously criticized in 2006 by Democratic challenger Phil Angelides who supported legislation to establish a state-run universal health care system.

The most relentless health care issue was acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, better known as AIDS. The disease first appeared in California in June 1981, when five young homosexuals in Los Angeles were diagnosed as having a rare type of pneumonia found only in people with deficient immune systems. Almost simultaneously, epidemiologists discovered the same disease in five gay men in San Francisco. A breakthrough in treating the disease came 3 years later when scientists succeeded in isolating the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes AIDS. The virus attacks a person's immune system, leaving the body vulnerable to a host of opportunistic infections and cancers.

By the twenty-fifth anniversary of the onset of the AIDS epidemic, more than 138,000 Californians had been stricken with the disease and over half of those had died. Homosexuals and intravenous drug users accounted for most of the disease's victims. Thousands of San Franciscans were HIV-positive, more per capita than in any other major American city. In southern California, only the seaside town of Laguna Beach had a higher rate of infection than San Francisco. Long fashionable as a gay tourist mecca, this popular resort community was hard hit by the disease. Randy Shilts, author of an early history of the AIDS epidemic, caught the irony of such devastation in an idyllic setting. "The reality of AIDS is so contrary," Shilts observed, "to the Southern California ethos of youth and beauty."

California led the nation in committing its resources to the fight against AIDS. The state developed a computerized AIDS registry, mandated universal blood-donor screening, and established a highly successful program for voluntary, anonymous HIV testing. State-sponsored prevention programs and a safe-sex ethic slowly reduced the overall rate of HIV infection. The early 2000s, however, witnessed an alarming increase in the proportion of new infections among African Americans and Latinos. "For young gay men of color," reported the director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy, "the epidemic is getting worse, not better." Calvin Gipson, the grand marshal of the 2004 Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco, agreed. "AIDS is a crisis in the black community," he noted. "Black people are dying at a time when other people are surviving."

The AIDS epidemic, of course, was not limited to California or the United States. It soon became the fastest-growing disease in the world, taking an especially heavy toll in the developing countries of Africa. Forty million people worldwide had been stricken by 2006, with 12,000 new infections each day. The president of the World Health Organization declared that AIDS was "the world's first truly global epidemic, and it calls for a global response." He warned that the epidemic was "still gaining momentum and its major impact is yet to come."

## Criminal Justice

Another issue of grave concern to Californians in recent decades was the state's crime rate. The rate of violent crime more than doubled in the 1960s and continued to spiral upward in the following two decades before stabilizing and beginning to